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**DECEMBER 2020** 

## FREEBUNDLE

**FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION** 

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Black Mass

by Javier Cabrera

Notes of a Survivor

by Benjamin Davis

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Ten almost-lucky dogs will get an original Dogeron DOG Kenan art piece from DOG's current comic run, signed (of course) by the Cabrera Brothers.

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## FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION

Editor: Javier Cabrera Art: Carlos Cabrera, Javier Cabrera

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## A Very Different Christmas

Other than the holiday festivities, there is little to celebrate this year with the plague's arrival. Do not worry, though. We are all about Christmas cheers here. To prove it, we are publishing the children's version of the highly celebrated A Christmas Carol, written by no other than Mr. Charles Dickens, with original art from its first edition in 1843.

Also, in this issue, we are including another one of our Abraham Van Helsing serials. This particular one, titled "Black Mass", features a very special guest, given the time of the year, that is.

Benjamin Davis takes us to a (now) very possible future with "Notes of a Survivor". Adam Ells, share with us his fantastic "Price of Ashes". Julian Grant, a producer, writer, and director who you might know from the RoboCop: Prime Directives TV Series, Sweet Leaf (2013) or The Doctor's Wife (2011), honor us with a short story based on a new original animation short "SiSif's Folly". Lucrezia Pei and Ornella Soncini are two gifted Italian writers making their English debut with "Lizard's Tail".

Finally, to celebrate this our first Christmas Special, we have a very special gift for you: a Holiday run of our "Digital Trading Cards"! What are you waiting for? Go open your present by clicking the link down below and enjoy—happy Holidays from everyone at Free Bundle Magazine. See you next year!





HERBERT WEST----REANIMATOR

## The Plague-Daemon

Bv H. P. Lovecraft

This is the second story from the Herbert West--Reanimator series, first published under the title of "Grewsome Tales" as a six part serial in Home Brew (Feb-Jul 1922).

I SHALL never forget that hideous summer sixteen years ago, when like a noxious afrite from the halls of Eblis typhoid stalked leeringly through Arkham. It is by that satanic scourge that most recall the year, for truly terror brooded with bat-wings over the piles

of coffins in the tombs of Christchurch Cemetery; yet for me there is a greater horror in that time—a horror known to me alone now that Herbert West has disappeared.

West and I were doing post-graduate work in summer classes at the medical school of Miskatonic University, and my friend had attained a wide notoriety because of his experiments leading toward the revivification of the dead. After the scientific slaughter of uncounted small animals the freakish work had ostensibly stopped by order of our sceptical dean, Dr. Allan Halsey; though West had continued to perform certain secret tests in his dingy boarding-house room, and had on one terrible and unforgettable occasion taken a human body from its grave in the potter's field to a deserted farmhouse beyond Meadow Hill.

I was with him on that odious occasion, and saw him inject into the still veins the elixir which he thought would to some extent restore life's chemical and physical processes. It had ended horribly—in a delirium of fear which we gradually came to attribute to our own overwrought nerves-and West had never afterward been able to shake off a maddening sensation of being haunted and hunted. The body had not been quite fresh enough; it is obvious that to restore normal mental attributes. a body must be very fresh indeed; and a burning of the old house had prevented us from burying the thing. It would have been better if we could have known it was underground.

After that experience West had dropped his researches for some time; but as the zeal of the born scientist slowly returned, he again became importunate with the college faculty, pleading for the use of the dissecting-room and of fresh human specimens for the work he regarded as so overwhelmingly important. His pleas, however, were wholly in vain; for the decision of Dr. Halsey was inflexible, and the other professors all endorsed the verdict of their leader. In the radical theory of reanimation they saw nothing but the immature vagaries of a youthful enthusiast whose slight form, yellow hair, spectacled blue eyes, and soft voice gave no hint of the supernormal—almost diabolical—power of the cold brain within. I can see him now as he was then—and I shiver. He grew sterner of face, but never elderly. And now Sefton Asylum has had the mishap and West has vanished.

West clashed disagreeably with Dr. Halsey near the end of our last undergraduate term in a wordy dispute that did less credit to him than to the kindly dean in point of courtesy. He felt that he was needlessly and irrationally retarded in a supremely great work; a work which he could of course conduct to suit himself in later years, but which he wished to begin while still possessed of the exceptional facilities of the university. That the tradition-bound elders should ignore his singular results on animals, and persist in their denial of the possibility of reanimation, was inex-

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pressibly disgusting and almost incomprehensible to a youth of West's logical temperament. Only greater maturity could help him understand the chronic mental limitations of the "professor-doctor" type—the product of generations of pathetic Puritanism; kindly, conscientious, and sometimes gentle and amiable, yet always narrow, intolerant, custom-ridden, and lacking in perspective. Age has more charity for these incomplete yet high-souled characters, whose worst real vice is timidity, and who are ultimately punished by general ridicule for their intellectual sins—sins like Ptolemaism, Calvinism, anti-Darwinism, anti-Nietzscheism, and every sort of Sabbatarianism and sumptuary legislation. West, young despite his marvellous scientific acquirements, had scant patience with good Dr. Halsey and his erudite colleagues; and nursed an increasing resentment, coupled with a desire to prove his theories to these obtuse worthies in some striking and dramatic fashion. Like most youths, he indulged in elaborate day-dreams of revenge, triumph, and final magnanimous forgiveness.

And then had come the scourge, grinning and lethal, from the nightmare caverns of Tartarus. West and I had graduated about the time of its beginning, but had remained for additional work at the summer school, so that we were in Arkham when it broke with full daemoniac fury upon the town. Though not as yet licenced physicians, we now had our degrees, and were pressed frantically into public service as

the numbers of the stricken grew. The situation was almost past management, and deaths ensued too frequently for the local undertakers fully to handle. Burials without embalming were made in rapid succession, and even the Christchurch Cemetery receiving tomb was crammed with coffins of the unembalmed dead. This circumstance was not without effect on West, who thought often of the irony of the situation—so many fresh specimens, yet none for his persecuted researches! We were frightfully overworked, and the terrific mental and nervous strain made my friend brood morbidly.

But West's gentle enemies were no less harassed with prostrating duties. College had all but closed, and every doctor of the medical faculty was helping to fight the typhoid plague. Dr. Halsey in particular had distinguished himself in sacrificing service, applying his extreme skill with whole-hearted energy to cases which many others shunned because of apparent hopelessness. orBefore a month was over the fearless dean had become a popular hero, though he seemed unconscious of his fame as he struggled to keep from collapsing with physical fatigue and nervous exhaustion. West could not withhold admiration for the fortitude of his foe, but because of this was even more determined to prove to him the truth of his amazing doctrines. Taking advantage of the disorganisation of both college work and municipal health regulations, he managed to get a recently deceased body smuggled into the

university dissecting-room one night, and in my presence injected a new modification of his solution. The thing actually opened its eyes, but only stared at the ceiling with a look of soul-petrifying horror before collapsing into an inertness from which nothing could rouse it. West said it was not fresh enough—the hot summer air does not favour corpses. That time we were almost caught before we incinerated the thing, and West doubted the advisability of repeating his daring misuse of the college laboratory.

The peak of the epidemic was reached in August. West and I were almost dead, and Dr. Halsey did die on the 14th. The students all attended the hasty funeral on the 15th, and bought an impressive wreath, though the latter was quite overshadowed by the tributes sent by wealthy Arkham citizens and by the municipality itself. It was almost a public affair, for the dean had surely been a public benefactor. After the entombment we were all somewhat depressed, and spent the afternoon at the bar of the Commercial House; where West, though shaken by the death of his chief opponent, chilled the rest of us with references to his notorious theories. Most of the students went home, or to various duties, as the evening advanced; but West persuaded me to aid him in "making a night of it". West's landlady saw us arrive at his room about two in the morning, with a third man between us; and told her husband that we had all evidently dined and wined rather well.

Apparently this acidulous matron was right; for about 3 a.m. the whole house was aroused by cries coming from West's room, where when they broke down the door they found the two of us unconscious on the blood-stained carpet, beaten, scratched, and mauled, and with the broken remnants of West's bottles and instruments around us. Only an open window told what had become of our assailant, and many wondered how he himself had fared after the terrific leap from the second story to the lawn which he must have There were some garments in the room, but West upon regaining consciousness said they did not belong to the stranger, but were specimens collected for bacteriological analysis in the course of investigations on the transmission of germ diseases. He ordered them burnt as soon as possible in the capacious fireplace. To the police we both declared ignorance of our late companion's identity. He was, West nervously said, a congenial stranger whom we had met at some downtown bar of uncertain location. We had all been rather jovial, and West and I did not wish to have our pugnacious companion hunted down.

That same night saw the beginning of the second Arkham horror—the horror that to me eclipsed the plague itself. Christchurch Cemetery was the scene of a terrible killing; a watchman having been clawed to death in a manner not only too hideous for description, but raising a doubt as to the human agency of the deed. The victim had been seen

## THE PLAGUE-DAEMON

alive considerably after midnight—the dawn revealed the unutterable thing. The manager of a circus at the neighbouring town of Bolton was questioned, but he swore that no beast had at any time escaped from its cage. Those who found the body noted a trail of blood leading to the receiving tomb, where a small pool of red lay on the concrete just outside the gate. A fainter trail led away toward the woods, but it soon gave out.

The next night devils danced on the roofs of Arkham, and unnatural madness howled in the wind. Through the fevered town had crept a curse which some said was greater than the plague, and which some whispered was the embodied daemon-soul of the plague itself. Eight houses were entered by a nameless thing which strewed red death in its wake-in all, seventeen maimed and shapeless remnants of bodies were left behind by the voiceless, sadistic monster that crept abroad. A few persons had half seen it in the dark, and said it was white and like a malformed ape or anthropomorphic fiend. It had not left behind quite all that it had attacked, for sometimes it had been hungry. The number it had killed was fourteen; three of the bodies had been in stricken homes and had not been alive.

On the third night frantic bands of searchers, led by the police, captured it in a house on Crane Street near the Miskatonic campus. They had organised the quest with care, keeping in touch by means of volunteer telephone

stations, and when someone in the college district had reported hearing a scratching at a shuttered window, the net was quickly spread. On account of the general alarm and precautions, there were only two more victims, and the capture was effected without major casualties. The thing was finally stopped by a bullet, though not a fatal one, and was rushed to the local hospital amidst universal excitement and loathing.

For it had been a man. This much was clear despite the nauseous eyes, the voiceless simianism, and the daemoniac savagery. They dressed its wound and carted it to the asylum at Sefton, where it beat its head against the walls of a padded cell for sixteen years—until the recent mishap, when it escaped under circumstances that few like to mention. What had most disgusted the searchers of Arkham was the thing they noticed monster's the face cleaned—the mocking, unbelievable resemblance to a learned and self-sacrificing martyr who had been entombed but three days before—the late Dr. Allan Halsey, public benefactor and dean of the medical school of Miskatonic University.

To the vanished Herbert West and to me the disgust and horror were supreme. I shudder tonight as I think of it; shudder even more than I did that morning when West muttered through his bandages,

"Damn it, it wasn't quite fresh enough!"

## Charles Dicken's A Christmas Carol

MASTER Peter, and the two ubiquitous young Cratchits went to fetch the goose, with which they soon returned in high procession.

Such a bustle ensued that you might have thought a goose the rarest of all birds; a feathered phenomenon, to which a black swan was a matter of course—and in truth it was something very like it in that house. Mrs. Cratchit made the gravy (ready beforehand in a little saucepan) hissing hot; Master Peter mashed the potatoes with incredible vigour; Miss Belinda sweetened up the apple-sauce; Martha dusted the hot plates; Bob took Tiny Tim beside him in a tiny corner at the table; the two young Cratchits set chairs for everybody, not forgetting themselves, and mounting guard upon their posts, crammed spoons into their mouths, lest they should shriek for goose before their turn came to be helped.

At last the dishes were set on, and grace was said. It was succeeded by a breathless pause, as Mrs. Cratchit, looking slowly all along the carving-knife, prepared to plunge it in the breast; but when she did, and when the long expected gush of stuffing issued forth, one murmur of delight arose all round the board, and even Tiny Tim, excited by the two young Cratchits, beat on the table with the handle of his knife, and feebly cried Hurrah!

There never was such a goose. Bob said he didn't believe there ever was such a goose cooked. Its tenderness and flavour, size and cheapness, were the themes of universal admiration. Eked out by the apple-sauce and mashed potatoes, it was a sufficient dinner for the whole family; indeed, as Mrs. Cratchit said with great delight (surveying one small atom of a bone upon the dish), they hadn't ate it all at last! Yet every one had had enough, and the youngest Cratchits in particular, were steeped in sage and onion to the eyebrows! But now, the plates being changed by Miss Belinda, Mrs. Cratchit left the room alone—too nervous to

bear witnesses—to take the pudding up and bring it in.

Suppose it should not be done enough! Suppose it should break in turning out. Suppose somebody should have got over the wall of the back-yard and stolen it, while they were merry with the goose—a supposition at which the two young Cratchits became livid! All sorts of horrors were supposed.

Hallo! A great deal of steam! The pudding was out of the copper. A smell like a washing-day! That was the cloth. A smell like an eating-house and a pastry-cook's next door to each other, with a laundress's next door to that! That was the pudding! In half a minute Mrs. Cratchit entered—flushed, but smiling proudly—with the pudding, like a speckled cannon-ball, so hard and firm, blazing in half of half-a-quartern of ignited brandy, and bedight with Christmas holly stuck into the top.

Oh, a wonderful pudding! Bob Cratchit said, and calmly too, that he regarded it as the greatest success achieved by Mrs. Cratchit since their marriage. Mrs. Cratchit said that now the weight was off her mind, she would confess she had had her doubts about the quantity of flour. Everybody had something to say about it, but nobody said or thought it was at all a small pudding for a large family. It would have been flat heresy to do so. Any Cratchit would have blushed to hint at such a thing.

At last the dinner was all done, the cloth was cleared, the hearth swept, and the fire made up. The compound in the

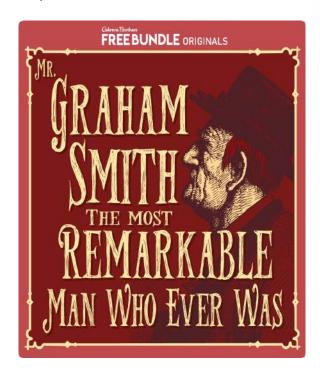
jug being tasted, and considered perfect, apples and oranges were put upon the table, and a shovel-full of chestnuts on the fire. Then all the Cratchit family drew round the hearth, in what Bob Cratchit called a circle, meaning half a one; and at Bob Cratchit's elbow stood the family display of glasses. Two tumblers, and a custard-cup without a handle.

These held the hot stuff from the jug, however, as well as golden goblets would have done; and Bob served it out with beaming looks, while the chestnuts on the fire sputtered and cracked noisily. Then Bob proposed:

"A Merry Christmas to us all, my dears. God bless us!"

Which all the family re-echoed.

"God bless us every one!" said Tiny Tim, the last of all.





by Javier Cabrera

Javier Cabrera is a novelist, short story writer, essayist and screenwriter working in a variety of genres including horror, science fiction, fantasy, and mystery. He is also the co-founder and the active CEO of Cabrera Brothers, a media and entertainment company and the editor of the Free Bundle Magazine, a modern-day Fantasy & Science Fiction Magazine.

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THE STAGE was darkness itself embodied. The glittering lights from countless phone screens were foolishly trying to pierce the shadows to capture a glimpse of what was behind the velvet curtain.

The spotlight gradually illuminated the center of the stage, as if it was a metaphor of creation itself. Before anyone could make out the shape of who was standing there, madness filled the auditorium. They were screaming. Screeching. Clenching their teeth in obscene hunger. Wildly howling in the dark like coyotes. He would not look at them. His back was all he offered them. They didn't deserve him, not yet. As if all their moaning, screeching, and hysteria were not enough for him to acknowl

**e**dge their existence.

Then, at the highest point of the abysmal crescendo, when insanity turned into rabid dementia, he breathed into the microphone, just once, so they knew he was there, that he was real, and that he belonged entirely to them; body and soul.

It was also the whisper of a promise—his promise. They were about to share a pleasure beyond boundaries with hundreds of others for one night and only one night. A night that neither their boyfriends nor husbands would be able to match. Ever. Only him, there and then.

He started to sing. His voice was April wind. It was the voice of morning, of all mornings, and it was also all the dusks in their lives. It was the voice of an angel, and it sent waves of lust across the sea of willing women who twisted in ecstasy while chanting his name. His song echoed across the Basilica. The murals of the old Roman church had seen devotees, but never true devotion.

At that exact moment, underneath the stage and lost in the interminable maze of tunnels, a woman gave birth for the first time.

Abraham Van Helsing stood in the middle of a massacre. It was dark, and the fetid emanations in that section of the sewerage turned things blurry, but the sounds his shoes were making as he made his way there were too familiar to him. It was the sound of the flesh of men being squashed under his soles.

As silently as he possibly could, Abraham removed the upper part of his switched flashlight and candle-mode but quickly regretted doing so. The lifeless body of the young woman he had been tracking for the last two months was the first thing he saw. She was lying naked over an improvised altar on the floor made out of cardboard boxes and italian newspapers. Her legs were spread open, and horror had been permanently chiseled itself on her face.

Despite the place being overwhelmingly infested with flies, none were resting over her young, rosy skin. They were surrounding the outline of the corpse as if they were chalk on a crime scene.

Covering his mouth and nose with a handkerchief, Abraham leaned over the corpse for close examination. Blood still poured out from the poor thing, but it did not mix with the sewers' oily putrid waters. It was as if not even filth wanted anything to do with her. Abraham took out a pair of tweezers from his coat inner pocket and lifted the placenta from within the woman's legs. It was of a greenish hue, and it dried to a thin crust almost instantly when he fished it out of the water—a dark omen a man with his vast knowledge in the occult picked up right away.

Underneath her corpse, there were patterns and symbols he chose not to stare at for too long; they were as dark and unholy as the place she and the rest of the cultists had found death. Whatever was that went wrong with what

they were trying to summon, it hadn't been long; blood and torn pieces of flesh were still dripping from the brick walls. The ceiling was low in that part of the sewerage, and the Dutchman was tall and corpulent, so he had to walk somewhat hunched to explore the rest of the junction.

There had been a small crowd gathering in there of no more than twenty cultists. Some of them had been indulging themselves in lustful acts of carnal madness. Others, he deducted, had found death while they read and chanted from dark scrolls which pages still burned in their crisped fingers.

Despite the somberness of the scene, Abraham was shocked to discover the area surrounding the woman began to smell quite pleasantly. In fact, he began to sense the scent of roses. There was no doubt in his mind now; something unholy had been born there.

The womb of the young woman had been used as a conduit, a doorway between worlds. In a way, she had been spared of the horror; her body was the only one not torn to shreds by whatever was she brought to life. The others were not so lucky; the scratches on the walls were a testament to their gruesome end.

Aided by his flashlight, Abraham found a dry spot to put down his apothecary's toolbox. He opened the old cedar box, revealing numerous shelves, drawers, and sliding compartments, each containing an invaluable collection of reliquaries, herbs, and other of esoteric and religious nature.

From one of the many drawers that

covered the box's interior, Abraham took only a small folding camera of rare German design. The antiquity belonged to a physiologist called Wilhelm Kühne, whom in 1880 had successfully managed to obtain the last image a man named Gustav Reif saw before he was executed by guillotine for the murder of his children.

The method Kühne developed, known as optography, had been largely ridiculed by modern forensic science for its closeness to the realm of the supranatural. Though more an art than a science, the process of obtaining the last recorded image from a corpse retina, is of such difficulty that only a few men are capable of successfully dominating its complex intricacies. One of those men was Abraham Van Helsing.

From the same compartment where the camera was stored, Abraham produced two metallic trays of only a few inches of depth and placed them next to the other on a leveled spot on the floor.

He then poured a thin layer of a purplish substance from one of the many flasks that were crammed inside the wooden chest in one of the trays, put on latex gloves, took out a disposable scalpel, and got to work.

He began by carefully removing the eyes from those corpses whose heads had not been crushed and placed them on the empty tray. Next, he tried to find the remaining eyes by meticulously going through the hunks and chunks of meat scattered everywhere. In total, he

## **BLACK MASS**

was able to salvage the eyes of eleven cultists and the girl. The rest was either too damaged or lost in the nauseating waters of the sewerage.

After retrieving the eyes and thoroughly soaking them for a few moments in the purplish substance, Abraham grabbed the scalpel and began to slice. Even though the place he was in was foul to the senses, and the lighting was limited only to his flashlight, the pulse of the Dutchman's hand could be matched only by his excellent use of the scalpel. His cuts were as clean as of a sushi master.

Over the years, the "Kühne camera" had been modified and even improved by different scholars of his work. The latest alteration had been done by a team of Italian morticians, the Ferrari brothers. It included a small battery-operated ultra-violet flash that, when shot, sent a light beam through the camera bellows to the lens's inner part. Between the bellows and the lens, the brothers added a removable disc-shaped membranous filter made of a thin film of cellulose acetate. Inside the filter, Abraham would place a thick slice of the eyeball from one of the corpses, switched his flashlight off, took a photo from the iris, and repeat the entire process for the next corpse.

In total, it took him nearly half an hour to have a picture from the iris of each one of the deceased and another half an hour to reveal the entire film, but once he had the photographs, Abraham shuddered. Most of the cultists had looked away when death showed,

so the last image their eyes saw was of either their own feet while trying to escape or the tunnels they were heading towards. But two saw what happened, clear as day.

One was the woman; she had kept her eyes open the entire time. The other was an older man. He had been buried by corpses of the other cultists, and it appears as if he had lived long enough to see the whole sequence of events, though Abraham only recovered the last image he saw. Whatever was the horror she had given birth to, someone had wrapped it in a blanket and took it away while the slaughter happened.

Christmas Eve. The bearded man in the spotless red suit was wrapping up the night when he noticed something odd about the house he had just got into. It was the last one he was supposed to be visiting before the long trip back to his workshop; the Williamses. But the house he was now standing in was not the same one he was used to visiting every year. Even more alarming, it was not the same house he had seen from the outside.

Somehow, when he came down the chimney, the entire room had changed. The walls were not where they were supposed to be. The beautiful and broad bifurcated staircase with the hand-knotted runner and the brass decorations were no longer there either. In its place, there was a straight, rather ugly looking staircase. It was ordinary and had been put together

with cheap wooden boards that barely held together. The place stank to mold, not to cookies—something he somehow doubted Ms. Williams and her daughter Jenny would hardly allow on that night. There were dust and cobwebs everywhere he looked, and the twelve-foot Regina Pina tree was, surprisingly, nowhere to be seen.

There was simply no life in there, no home-warmth. It was as cold and lifeless as the inside of a mausoleum. He failed to notice it right away, but there were a series of strange hieroglyphs carved on the floor where Mr. Williams' great grand father's rug should have been. Some of the symbols were alien to him, others he remembered from the forgotten days when men feasted in honor of their pagan deities.

Baffled, the man in the red suit turned around to check the fireplace he came through, but all he found was an ash-pit. The thought came down onto him like a slap to the face; he was not in the Williamses living room; he was in their basement.

It was dark, but he was used to the shadows; nights last for a long time from where he comes from. Hurried footsteps on a carpet somewhere above him woke him out of his stupor. The beam of a flashlight bounced on the staircase, the old wooden boards creaked loudly; someone was coming downstairs.

Unlike all the other times he had to hide to avoid being seen, this time around, the man in the red suit chose

not to. This time he opened his enormous velvet bag and stuck his hand inside with malice in his eyes, for even when the bag was supposed to be empty (or almost empty, depending on how Timothy and little Jenny Williams behaved during the year), the man in the red suit always made sure to keep something extra with him, just in case. A very special item he kept only for himself, stashed in one of the bag's inner pockets: an iron sledgehammer with the legend "Naughty Boy" burnt on its thick wooden handle. In the most absolute of the silences, the man in the red suit pulled out his iron sledgehammer, spat out his cigar, and took position near the bottom of the staircase.

Had it been any other man, the sledgehammer would have gone right through his head, but Abraham Van Helsing skipped a step at the exact moment the red suit man was swinging with all his might and death only but whistled past him.

Before he could stand to defend himself, though, or even attempt to talk to the man wielding the sledgehammer, death came whistling once more. This time, if Abraham had not used his apothecary box to deflect the blow, his head would have been turned into a pulp of flesh stuck to the floor.

"Sinterklaas, stop!" Abraham said. The red suit man was just about to start balancing the deadly weapon again when he recognized the man hiding behind the wooden box.

"Helsing?" the man said. Not many knew his real name, nor could

pronounce it in perfect Dutch. He was about to start lowering his sledgehammer but changed his mind and threw another blow. The short moment the red suit man stopped his attack won Abraham a split second, enough to move out of the way. He ended up rolling on the floor hugged to his apothecary box until his back hit a wall.

"I should have known it was you!" the man said, "You were warned not to mess with my schedule again."

"It was not me," Abraham said, using the wall to pull himself to his feet, "I had nothing to do with it this time."

The red suit man swung the sledge-hammer over his head heavily. When he struck, his blow tore down nearly the entire wall behind Abraham, who only had time to clumsily drop himself down to the floor to avoid getting crushed like a fly. It was at that instant that the man in the red suit noticed the Dutchman was wounded; something sharp had cut deep into the side of his ribs. Something with claws.

"Wait a minute," The man said, "You leaking, Helsing."

Abraham coughed badly. "

"You shouldn't have brought me with a wound like that. You're making it too easy for me."

"It was not me," Abraham said, "I did not conjure you here."

The man in the red suit pointed his thick finger at the symbols on the floor. "What about this then, uh? I suppose all this pagan mumbo-jumbo was already here before you came, right?"

"No, those are mine."

Abraham barely noticed the man was swinging again and moved only by reflex. The floor exploded under the fierce strength of the sledgehammer as if a grenade had gone off.

"Look at the time," The man said, as he unstuck his sledgehammer from the floor, "look at the goddamn time! What the hell you were thinking!"

"I told you; it was not me," Abraham said, but his words came out as a cough while he tried to caught his breath.

"Five freaking minutes, Helsing. Five." The man in the red suit held five thick fingers so Abraham could count them. "That pisses me off. It messes with my schedule. It does. This is a tight operation I run here, a tight operation. You have to account for the wind velocity, the distance between the houses, the airline routes, the time it takes for each kid to get into REM sleep, so they don't wake up and see me do my thing—lots of maths, lots of variables. Thanks to global warming, nights are shorter and shorter each year, did you know that?"

"I had no idea," Abraham said.

"It's true. The old formulas don't apply anymore; we have to come up with new ones every goddamn year. I don't even get to use the bathroom anymore; I use a rubber diaper. I do. Can't waste thirty seconds to take a leak nowadays, or it's a catastrophe. Before, I even had time to eat milk and cookies. Now I wear diapers. But you don't care about any of that, do you?"

"To be honest, no, I do not."

He couldn't lie. It was worse if he did, although, at that moment, Abraham

realized that anything he could have said would have been actually better than saying something like that. Perhaps even a lie.

The man's left eye twitched.

"I should not have said that," Abraham said, trying to hold his guts inside him, "You have my sincerest apologies."

"One doesn't mess with the schedule!" The red suit man said. His voice was thunder. Deep, rough, the voice of a man who commanded an entire legion of one of the most dangerous and cruelest supernatural beings in existence. Beings capable of overthrowing entire nations in a matter of hours. Beings he slaves into making toys.

"I understand," Abraham said, "but it was not me."

"Then what is all this sorcery for?"

"I needed to improvise a cage."

The man in the red suit's eyes widened.

"Put the hammer down," Abraham said, "I will explain it to you."

"All right," the man said, "everyone gets a chance. This is yours. Talk."

Abraham tried to stand, but his legs gave in, and he let himself fall down onto the cold floor again. "Just me a moment; I need to catch my breath here."

"You know how I feel about lies, Helsing," the man in the red suit said, "right now, you have me doubting, but that's all you have, so you better start talking before I stop doubting and make up my mind."

Abraham looked at the sledgeham

mer; the man wasn't kidding.

"I have been following this cultist for the past three days," Abraham began, but a bad cough interrupted him, and he had to stop. The wound was worse than the red suit man had initially thought. Luckily to Abraham, the man had the reputation of being kind-hearted and decided to wait until Abraham had finished coughing, then said, "Quit stalling, Helsing, or I will squash your damn head against the wall."

"This man," Abraham continued, "he was part of a black mass."

"They always are."

"We are not talking about one of those high-class gatherings here; this is different."

"Different how."

"It was not in some fancy country house; this happened on the sewers, underneath the Basilica di San Ignazio. They were summoning something."

The man in the red suit laughed a little. "That's it? That's all you've got? They were summoning something, so what? Big deal, it never works."

"This time did."

The man wasn't laughing anymore. "I told you before, I don't like lies."

"It is not a lie. This was not just any black mass; it was a Ceremonial. The cultists had this pregnant woman, she—" Abraham stopped. At that very moment, he realized what the man in the red suit was doing there. The cultist who ran away must have known that the only one capable of making sure the newborn was kept from men like Abraham would have to be one whose

higher command demanded the care and protection of the lives of all children, regardless of what there was in their hearts.

"Well?" The man in the red suit said, "What about the woman?"

Abraham chose not to continue. With any other man, he could have appealed to reason, to logic, even half-truths if it was necessary. But ultimately, it would not matter. Not with him. Sometimes silence is better than a lie.

The man in the red suit lifted the heavy sledgehammer and let it rest on his shoulder, the way a lumberjack would with his ax, "Well, you are not really giving me much to go on here, buddy."

A feeble sound came from within the chimney's ash dump, a spectral echo of a thing that desperately tried to convey something akin to a beg. It was a crying, a very faint cry, almost whisper-like, and it chilled the air of the already cold abandoned house the instant it was heard.

Both men felt a nerve-shattering perturbation of immeasurable repugnance, as there was a distinctively bizarre feature to the sound; it was mimicking the voice of a small child.

"I suppose you did not see anything on your way down," Abraham said.

"Something like what?"

The cry echoed again.

Abraham nodded towards the ash dump door.

"This is not the Williamses, isn't it?"
Abraham shook his head, slowly, as if he suspected that the commotion had

awoken something that shouldn't have been disturbed and was now futilely hoping it would go back to sleep again. He did not wait to check; he threw himself at the ash dump door as fast as his wounds allowed him to.

Before Abraham closed the door, though, the man in the red suit saw something that tried to squeeze itself out. Something that was neither human nor beast. A shadow. A slice of all that is filth, corrupt, and putrid. It was there, inside the chimney's ash dump, and began to fight Abraham, pushing itself against the metal door and trying to open it.

That instant was all he saw, and that instant was all his mind allowed him to discern to keep him from falling into absolute insanity.

"You are not the only one who is out of time, Sinterklass." Abraham said as he used the entire weight of his body to keep the door closed while putting on the lock, "If this thing gets out, it will feed itself."

"What will happen if it does?"

"You will have plenty of time for cookies and milk next year."

The pushing stopped. A moment later, something moved upstairs. There was a sound. This time it was not a cry, but more of a moan, slow, macabre. A sob that lingered on the air and wrecked the nerves of both men, becoming louder with each moment that went by, until finally, at the point where it seemed to become almost unbearable, it stopped.

From that moment on, no more

words were necessary. Having faced countless times the unspeakable horrors that plague and terrorize the souls of men, Abraham and the man in the red suit knew precisely how to proceed. They cut through the dark and rushed up the stairs as quietly as they could.

Upstairs, in the small living room, the man in the red suit found less life than in the basement. Abraham saw it took the man only a few moments to recognize the house they were in. Once he did, a tear rolled down his left cheek. The dried-up tree on the floor, the broken decorations, the red stockings still hanging from a chimney that had not seen warmth in years; for the man in the red suit, it was all as bitterly cold as the deepest caverns of the north pole.

Abraham went to the furthest corner and began opening his apothecary box. From the many bottles in its interior, he chose the one containing a blend of meticulously prepared herbs a group of excommunicated Benedictine monks grew for his exclusive use. Next, from one of the drawers, he took small pieces of bark from a tree that only has its roots in South Africa's coastal grasslands' underground forest.

After disinfecting his hands and squashing the herbs together inside a bandage, Abraham chewed off a chunk of the bark and spat out its juice onto the wound. While he finished wrapping his ribs with the strange compress, the man in the red suit, sledgehammer in hand, tiptoed until the fireplace and

waited.

From within the immutable darkness of the fireplace, something repugnant began to crawl. Something that already walked the earth when the ancestors of men had barely started to venture outside the primordial waters. It somehow found its way across the chasms of time and cosmos and was there, in the living room, feeling the cold bricks of the chimney like a blind man feels the walls when entering a room for the first time. As if the gloomy darkness of the fireplace was too bright for it to open its eyes and needed total blackness to see.

To say that what Abraham and the man in the red suit experienced upon seeing the fingers of that deform, repulsive limb clumsily dragging themselves over the chimney wall shattered every sense of sanity from their minds would be to phrase what happened to them too lightly. The mere sight of that pallid, gruesome hide the thing had for skin almost dragged them into unconsciousness.

The man in the red suit was about to swing his sledgehammer when the bony arm began to contort itself back into the chimney's shaft. A moment later, a leg fell. It bounced horribly on the grate, raising a thick cloud of ashes. When the ashes dissipated, both men noticed that something had chewed the meat off the leg—something with teeth too large and irregular to belong to animal or beast known by any of them.

Abraham shuddered. The leg had been mercilessly torn apart from some

one's body with such inhumane strength that shreds of the victim's torso still hanged from it. Nobody else was in the house before the man in the red suit arrived but him, the newborn, and the cultist.

It had fed.

Something moved inside the chimney flue. Something large enough to push itself against the wall and deform it as if it had been made out of paper. Abraham signaled the man in the red suit it was time to leave; the Dutchman's original plan to entrap whatever was lurking behind the wall in the basement ash dump would not work anymore.

As the thing moved, the eyes of the man in the red suit went wild. He, of all people, could not allow a travesty like that to happen. It was he who killed the creature. Blow after blow, explosion after explosion until the entire fireplace came down along with most of the wall.

Amidst the smoke, amidst the broken bricks of the fireplace that shoot away like bullets, the man in the red suit kept swinging his hammer. Righteously. Impartially. Without any emotion invested into the task, but with the fierceness of an avenging angel.

The hammer kept coming down over and over until it finally hit something. Something desperately trying to crawl away between the angles of the walls. Something akin to a centipede. Something that could have walked up straight if it wanted to, but that still hadn't learned how to. Something that couldn't find a clear path between the thunderous blows of the red suit man's sledge

hammer and the wreckage on the floor.

The dust cleared. Whatever was the thing Abraham and the red suit man were seeing writhe in agony on the floor, it was feeling fear for the first time in its existence. It was shaking, contorting itself with the pains of death. It was aberrant. Perverted. A nauseous representation of life. It was also a child, or what could have been a child. As darkness wrapped itself around it, the bright green of its eyes, of all its eyes, faded slowly into a milky blue. Its mouth stayed perpetually open in a silently scream of horror at the sight of the man who had snatched life away from it so harshly.

The thing moaned once, then died. It had the eyes of its mother.

Nothing Abraham could have said or done could have lighted the burden for the man in the red suit, so he kept silent. He watched him drop his sledgehammer and fell to his knees, biting his own lip until a thin line of blood drew over his long white beard. The man in the red suit knew he had not been lied to, that what had to happen, happened, and that the thing in the chimney was better off dead, crushed on the floor than doing God knows what among men.

Still, he cried his heart out.

The last thing Abraham saw before walking out of the house was the man in the red suit sinking his face between his hands and murmuring, "Peace on earth..."

# Notes of a Survivo Su

Benjamin Davis is a former reviewer turned engineer. He used to write for TopTenReviews, reviewing products and writing reviews. After doing that for a few years, he decided to try engineering and currently works as a software engineer.

More about Benjamin here

I DON'T KNOW how long I'll have before I'm found, so I've grabbed the only paper I could find and decided to write as much as I could before I am discovered. I may be the only one who knows that there are three types of undead creatures. You might as well call all of them zombies, since they all want the same thing: the flesh of the living.

They might as well be zombies for another couple of reasons. From what I can tell, they are all dead. Despite being dead, they are all mobile and desperate to find living beings to capture and eat. And within a minute of being bitten or scratched by a zombie, people will die and become one of the first two types.

Types! There are three of them.

The first type are the Shamblers, or the obviously dead. When all this started, we called them zombies because they looked and acted like the traditional groaning creatures from movies. Their skin is actively decaying and falling off their frames. They are caked in dirt, blood, and shit. Living people are naturally repulsed by them, and in small numbers, they are usually easy to

## NOTES OF A SURVIVOR

take out or escape. The problem comes from their ability to draw other zombies to them. I don't know what they use to call for help, but if one Shambler sees you, you better start moving because more are on the way.

Next, the Scouts are newly dead humans who can hide their bites or scratches. They look like living people, and they try to gain the trust of others. I have seen Scouts kill several Shamblers as they feign a retreat, and I have seen many communities of living people fall to an infestation after rescuing a hidden Scout. Scouts seem to be able to speak, but they do it infrequently. Their mission is to infiltrate and expose survivors, and when their bodies have decayed, they become Shamblers, slow and purposeful like the other Type One zombies. Usually, Type Two zombies are most dangerous for the week or two that they can deceive humans, so they have to make it count.

In fact, I heard someone crying outside and peaked out my attic window to see a child slowly walking up the street. About twenty feet behind him, a group of Shamblers were keeping their distance, ready to speed up if anyone was lured to the trap. If I hadn't been surviving this infestation for a few months, I would have rushed out to help the kid, only to have my front door unlocked in the night. You can't take risks. If you shoot a Scout in the street, you give yourself away. Zombies aren't smart, but they aren't so dumb they can't figure out that bullets don't magically appear. They would have torn

down this neighborhood to find me, killing others who are hiding nearby. At least, I act like the other houses have living people in them. It wouldn't be fair to risk their lives just to pop the top of a Type Two.

Most people I've run into have only dealt with these two types, but I've had the unfortunate experience of discovering a third type. It was bad enough to know that there was an infestation, so few people wanted to get to the bottom of it. I'm just not that kind of person, though. I don't believe anything is random. Consequences may seem random, but there was some action to cause the results.

I made it my mission to figure things out while the problem was still small, still contained to my town. At least, while I thought it was a local phenomenon.

When the infestation started, the first thing we lost was communication: no TV, no radio, no cellular. Every tower and antenna in and around the township was toppled. At first, we thought these creatures were just Luddites. There were some who thought it was a coordinated attack, and in a couple of days, I started to think the same. In the first week, we lost emergency services, and hospitals became a breeding ground for more zombies, usually Shamblers.

People gathered in public spaces, hoping to find safety: grocery stores, community centers, schools, and libraries were popular spots for people seeking refuge. Then, the

Scouts started appearing.

I lived a block away from a school, and while I often visited to gather supplies and help with repairs, I never wanted to be around so many people. I was there the night they fell, though.

We saw a beautiful young woman, running away from six or seven Shamblers. She screamed and kept her distance from the creatures, but we knew she couldn't hold out much longer. Someone said we had to let her in, and we tore away the barricade at the front door. We had guns, so we shot the Shamblers and let her in. I didn't feel like going home after all the noise we made. I burned the bodies and kept watch at the front.

After a few hours, I heard the screams. I later learned that the young woman we rescued scratched a few of the guards near a fire exit and opened the door to a small hoard of Shamblers waiting quietly for their opportunity. I got out as quick as I could and took a circuitous route back to my home. Someone either had a brilliant idea or a happy accident because in minutes, the school was blazing, and a few nearby buildings caught with it.

That's how I knew they were strategizing. These weren't your TV-grade zombies, moving mindlessly towards their next meal. These were soldiers, planning attacks on their enemy. I started asking any survivors I could find about their first memories with the infestation, and eventually, I narrowed their "headquarters" to a cemetery, a set of old-town tunnels that hadn't

been completely decommissioned, or the city's municipal building.

I'll be brief about my methods, as I promised to reveal the third type. The cemetery was across from a water tower. Around three in the morning, I climbed the tower and set up a small covering against its elevated side. It wasn't perfect, but at the time, I still believed little intelligence drove these creatures. Fortune smiled on me, and I survived the night. I could see many open graves. Clearly, there were actual dead that had climbed to the surface and started their invasion, but nothing suggested this was a return location.

Next, I made my way downtown and got into one of the bars I knew still had its tunnels. I learned then that the curses of the living still haunt the dead, as the Shamblers and Scouts in here were far more interested in drinking than in attacking me. I slipped in unnoticed and got into the basement without entering the bar proper.

The tunnel walls had been destroyed, the half-century-old cement and brick-work scattered in all directions. I had night-vision goggles, so I was able to navigate without generating much light or noise. The tunnels moved for miles in all directions, but the further out I went, the fewer walls had been torn down. It seemed that the tunnels were mostly used when the invasion lacked the soldiers to mount a true offense. They climbed into the bars and restaurants throughout the city, taking people by surprise and recruiting more to their cause. They no longer needed surprise,

now that they had numbers.

The tunnels connected most of the downtown buildings, including the municipal building, and once I poked my head inside, I knew I found the source. Inside, there were robed corpses scattered throughout the basement room, and at the center of the floor was the chalky remains of a sigil. I found a burnt book that probably would have given clues if it had survived. It was strange to see anyone permanently dead, but these bodies looked like one death was all they needed.

I carefully climbed the stairs to the higher floors, skipping the first floor for fear that Shamblers would be guarding the location. There was nothing of interest in the offices. One day, bureaucrats were coming to work, stamping documents and forwarding memos. The next, they were the walking dead. Some probably escaped, but the carnage in the room suggested very few. The point was that these floors were empty, so the dead didn't stay dead up here. Whatever killed everyone in the basement worked, and now the dead are alive.

I felt them before I saw them. The thing about Type Three zombies is that they were never alive to begin with. These creatures are demons. They radiate evil. I found them in the Council Chambers, seated all over the room. I watched from a window outside, too scared to infiltrate the room. If I could feel their evil outside, could they feel me inside?

They were tall and humanoid, except their skin was covered in blue and grey scales. They wore red hoods over their heads, and shadow covered their faces. I could see their chins were the same blue and grey scaly flesh, but I could not distinguish lips. While their appearance was ubiquitous, their bearings were unique. A couple stood in the room, huddled in small groups. Some sat at the Council's desk, ruling over the rest in the room. A few were loners, sitting or leaning in isolation throughout the room. The effect suggested that while these creatures were the same, they were individuals. Their outer appearance was more of a uniform than anything else.

I was trying to see what they were when one of the loners spotted me. I felt a whine in my inner ear, like someone leaned over my shoulder and started mewling. It turned to the door. Its movement got the attention of the others, and soon, about a dozen hoods were pointed at me. The ones at the Council table pointed at me, and the whine in my head became a scream. I fell to my knee, clutching at the sides of my head.

I heard the door opening, and a kicked my foot against it. While I rubbed my temples, I felt my locked knee thrumb against their pounding and pushing. Soon, I felt my thigh moving back, and I realized they would overpower me. I kicked myself to my feet and ran to the stairs. I knew the building well enough to know there were four sets of stairs, and about

halfway down the building, I switched stairwells to confuse them. I went back to the basement, still avoiding the main lounge, and went back into the tunnels.

The third type of zombie is not of this world. I call them Screamers. They have a psychic link to the rest of them, I'm sure. It's been three months since I discovered them, but every week, I must abandon my hideout due to Shamblers somehow finding me. When I find a new home base, I have a day before Scouts start moving up the streets, begging for salvation.

I believe I have been tagged. How else do they always find me? I don't have much time left. The most I can do for anyone in this world is leave this letter behind and hope it is not found by the enemy. I've been thinking of getting out of the city and up to higher ground, but because the toppled communication towers were always set at mountain peaks, I know the zombies hit the trails and roads early. Who knows how many Shamblers are wandering the woods? Hell! Who knows if there are zombie mountain lions out there?

I'm going to draw the Shamblers somewhere else and hope this letter finds a survivor. I've thought about going out in a blaze of glory, but I'm too scared of dying.



A strange door surfaces in the middle of the South Pole.

Nobody knows how it got there. Nobody knows what's behind.

Walter Gibson, a seasoned war correspondent, will be joining a group of scientists from every nation to find out.

Grab your gear and accompany him as he walks...

## THROUGH THE GATES OF MADNESS

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Julian Grant is an animator, an educator, and author of strange and unique short stories plus full-length novels/ non-fiction texts and graphic novels. A tenured Associate Professor at Columbia College Chicago, his work is enjoyed worldwide. Find out more about him at:

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Sif chanted the words over her beloved, fingers floating as she traced the runes on the cold body. Nothing. Beneath her, the corpse lay still. With tongue clenched between her teeth, sweat slid down as she implored her Gods in silent concentration.

Loki remained still. His matted, grey hair lank against him, eyes struck open in a final upward stare. Sif waived the greedy flies that tried to gather away.

"Put him aside for me, Sif," Mother called. "We can have him for dinner tonight."

Sif gasped as she grasped Loki by his long-tapered ears, clasping the rabbit to her chest.

"No, Mama, he's mine...we can't eat him

-- then he won't come back. We can't!"

Storming out from her place under the kitchen table, Sif raced out of the kitchen slamming the door behind her, tears blinding her mad dash into the late summer streets.

Kattegat was a busy trading port filled with travelers from all over the world bunched together on the docks in a clump of crates, furs, and people. Sif's eyes picked and dismissed the swarms of adults before her, merchant, mercenary, maiden. The list ran long as she cradled her newly dead friend. Loki had been her companion for life -- and now he was gone. Mother had warned her not to name or grow attached to any of the animals. They were good only for the yard or the pot -- but Sif had ignored her once she fell into the limpid brown eyes of the rabbit and stroked his soft, velvet pelt. He was hers and she was his.

"There must be a way to fix him," Sif muttered as she continued to weigh the tradesmen and travelers crowding the open-air market. "Some foreign magicker or rite I can perform to bring sweet Loki back." The crowded stalls and curiously colored tents brought no relief to Sif as she wandered through the crowds.

As evening fell, the shutters were drawn and the last of the crates closed leaving Sif alone in the purple twilight. It was time for her to go home. Her mother would already be angry for her racing out into town without an escort. Loki lolled in the girl's arms as she took one last hopeful look about the market.

Sweet incense drifted on the air as she

drew close to an alleyway skirting the square. A rune decorated tent with torches of yellow, blue and green remained open -- calling to her. Sif crept towards the lights drawn by their strange, beautiful colors flickering in the half-light.

Inside the rough-hewn tent, a grizzled Shaman prayed solemnly in his ritual space. Candles closeted the tent as thick, fragrant smoke floated above him. Reciting under his breath, the holy man breathed his offerings to Great One-Eye and his bride. Bright sparks of many colors danced from the totem he clenched in his gnarled hands as he dedicated himself to the Gods.

With greedy desperate eyes, Sif saw the magic burst forth from the Shaman's wand. Clutching Loki to her chest, a smile crept across her tear-streaked face.

"This is what we need, Loki. Real magic. I shall steal his wand and use it to bring you back. There will be no pot for you, no dinner of boiled love and broken promises." Laughter danced in her heart as she stole away into the shadows running up the hill home.

She had no problem creeping out later that night, her feet fleet as she winged to the Shaman's tent. Sif liberated the jewel-encrusted yew branch as the old magicker slept, his snores bellowing in the crisp, cold night.

Sif climbed up the steep streets out of Kattegat through the thin trail cut into the far-reaching woodland that towered over their town. High above them, the holy circle lay waiting for Sif to bring

her friend. Night fell in velvet splendor the higher Sif traveled ever upwards with the stars alone lighting her way. Loki offered no complaint as they clambered closer to the Gods and their salvation. Stealing skywards, her hand clutched the magician's tool as she recited the spell she had made up from the family daybook. She had unearthed rituals for life, prayers for the crops and had mixed them well together in her determination and intent. She pushed through the bracken moving ever higher on the steep mountainous range on lightning quick feet. The altar awaited. On her back, Loki bobbed in merry counterpoint to Sif's every step.

At the summit, five stone monuments ringed the clearing -- tall, strong warriors of old whose names she did not know. The heavy boulders stood sentinel to the ritual space. She panted in breathless wonder at the strange tall figures, silver starlight the only witness to her arrival. Sif flustered down to the praying stones, her fingers tracing intricate rune shapes in the dirt. She pulled Loki from her strapping and laid her sleeping love down in the sacred space. Breathing deep, she began her incantation, her secret magic words of reanimation filched from prayers of old. Above, the stars wheeled in desperate glory as Sif wove patterns with the wand for help.

"Blessed be, my love. Arise, arise my heart," she cried out. "Love comes back to me so I may no longer lament."

Standing now, her body taunt, her hands reached towards the night sky as

she cried out into the inky blackness.

"Hail Odin, Hail Freyr, Hail all the Gods. Bring back my Loki, my best friend and forever companion.:

Ethereal waves of colored light burst forth from the wand surrounding the keening girl as her exhortations and celebrations reached upwards. Onwards, her pleas and promises wove tapestries of love as more and more fiery forever light flooded them both.

"Return to me, my favorite, my most loved - rise up my friend, my companion most fair and beloved. Bring back to me my protector, my strong and silent love. I implore you to honor and bless my humble request."

With a downward thrust of her arm, she pointed the magic wand at Loki.

'So Mote It Be!"

An eruption of yellow and gold fire burst upon the clearing as Sif's calls echoed through the stones and the deep rich forest. Magic light exploded in an exhortation of colors -- and then was gone.

Loki lay still, unmoving, his pink tongue lolling in an endless smirk.

"Loki, Loki?"

Sif leaned over the rabbit reaching out to him. His marble, sightless eyes stared back.

Hot torrents of angry, bitter tears burst as Sif's small fists pummeled the ground in frustration.

The spell had not worked. Loki was still dead.

"Why won't you listen to me?!" Sif shrieked as she snapped the magic wand in horse-mad fury. She threw the crackling, broken tool into the clearing as her cries bled out.

"If you do not believe in me, then I shall not believe in you. I forsake you. You are not who you claim."

From the wand, waving contrails of ether seeped out into the rocky hilltop slowly dimming in the stone. Sif lifted her cold love in last goodbye, her magick spent and Loki forgotten by all but her.

"No pot for you, Loki. No embarrassment of potato or sauce. I shall give you a grave -- a fine one made of love and labor. You will not grace our table. I can do that for you, at least."

Sif dug with threadbare hands on the rock face floor looking out into the bay. From here, Loki would enjoy a fine sunset each night and she could visit him from time to time. She sang softly to herself as she labored.

"The rabbits are all asleep in their beds, I join them now as I lay down my head. We shall see each other again evermore. Tonight let us drift to the endless shore. Sleep well. Goodnight."

Behind her, a rock fell in sharp relief in the cold, quiet night, a bright clack that set her nerves afire.

"Who's there?"

All of the wolves in Kattegat had long been hunted from the wolves but many scavengers could be counted on returning at the turn of the season.

Sif's heart throbbed in quick, rabbit steps as she willed herself not to panic.

"I am almost a maiden grown," she muttered through clenched teeth. "I will not disgrace my family." Her hands flew to the short branch she had used to dig Loki's grave. Breathing softly, she turned to face the sacred stones, her breath pluming in the night, eyes narrowed in anticipation of a strike.

"I am fire and thunder! I fear no creature!"

She raised her club, stepping out into the circle, eyes darting from side to side.

Before her, a rock fell untouched against the broken magic wand lying alone in the circle.

Then another. And yet another -moving as if pushed by hands unseen -climbing up on the neighboring stone.

Sif watched in growing wonder as stone upon stone began to push against one another, jostling in never-ending fashion. Her stick forgotten, Sif marveled at the magic before her -- moving closer to the growing collection of harsh shale and granite cascading together.

Around her, the rock circle rumbled in uneasy sympathy. The ground beneath Sif's feet tremors in anticipation. Jagged plinths of long-dormant stone burst forth from the ground thrusting up towards the night sky. Rocks gamboled and clacked in restless fashion finding purchase against one another in ominous shape and form.

Her breath caught in Sif's throat as before her a creature of rough hammered stone assembled itself -- a rising homunculus birthing from the ground. It pulled itself free from the dirt towering over the girl. The creature's rocky maw howled in silent protest as Sif fell

to the ground swamped in tendrils of fantastic color that burst from the creature. Feldspar, iron and thick-loamed rock became a giant man of crooked teeth and bright red emerald eyes shining bright.

Hurling herself down the trail, her part in this terrible birth forgotten as raw animal panic added speed to her frantic retreat. Sif raced through the tree-lined path as terror fueled her flight. Behind her, the monster thundered -- heavy iron footsteps beating a tattoo of thick, dark pursuit.

Sif fell, flailed and leaped through the bitter boughs that slapped against her tearing at her face and hair. Thin fingers of sharp needles stung her eyes and face as she fell down the forest path racing home.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Sif cried out as she chanced a look over her shoulder as the stone creature rumble-tumbled through the pines. She had created a giant rock creature that shouldered through the forest in easy fashion. A dull choking sound chunneled out from the depths of its impossible mouth. Thick breaths of rugged earth fell upon the forest floor as laughter born of the mountains spilled from the creature.

It reached for her as Sif slid down to the ground avoiding the long, fractured fingers of rock. She lost all tread and control of her flight, falling hard down the crooked path unable to slow her descent. Scrambling, desperate feet and grasping hands flailed in terror as the turnoff for her appeared. Sif bleated as the edge of the path gave way to the long fall to the rocks below. Her fingers grasped at grass and tree trying to slow her mad downwards spiral.

Sif fell off the mountain out into space.

She shrieked in the cool, whistling night as her hands streaked out for impossible rescue.

Above her, the stone golem flew out into the emptiness following her. It plucked her in flight with ease as Sif's eyes closed in resignation.

The rock being wrapped itself around Sif cocooning her in its body, swallowing Sif whole as it rolled, slapped and gallumped through the brackish treetops and gnarled brush. Sif waited in silent blackness as the rock creature smashed to the ground -- bursting on impact.

She flew out onto the thick grassland beyond the rocks as her stone prison shattered about her. Large pieces of stone shattered around her as a torrential wave of pebbles carried Sif safely to a stop.

Bruised, bloodied -- but alive, she dragged herself up looking at the mound of stones. Panting in weary exhaustion, she rubbed her eyes casting a cautious look at the now silent rock.

It lived no more.

Her laughter peeled out in bright flower as she staggered away to home not seeing the small cascade of stones, red-eyed rubied creatures - drawing themselves up from the dust. Hundreds of small living friends followed her as she limped back to Kattegat.

She would never be alone again.

## Lizard's Tail

by Lucrezia Pei and Ornella Soncini

Lucrezia Pei and Ornella Soncini are two young Italian writers who are relatively new to the anglophone literary sphere: after several works published in Italy both online and in print (most recently on Sulla quarta corda and Spore), they will soon make their U.S. debut on The Shoutflower. The original Italian version of Lizard's Tail, Coda di lucertola, appeared early this year in Sulla quarta corda, an Italian online literary magazine.

https://www.instagram.com/sottolacopertina/

Halfway through the preparation I get a cut, straight down the middle of my palm.

«Add more caciocavallo, 'ammamma, there's a smidgen of it left over — bet it's gonna go bad and then what, we'll have to throw it away...»

I put the rice ball down and grabbed the cheese, holding with one hand and slicing with the other; but ever since my latest accident, if I focus on standing straight, my fingers won't obey me.

I feel the burn. When I look down, there is a wound there. No blood is coming out, it's healing pretty fast.

My mother doesn't notice what's happening to me. She's facing away, showing us where to set down the already breaded rice balls as she looks after the frying with my aunts.

By the time I've added the cheese, compacted the rice, laid the arancino on a large plate, I'm already healed. But at a price. Right after the cut, I felt

I couldn't really stand up as before. It's less comfortable now. My knees are bending, my legs are splaying out a little wider below me. Eventually, my bones will snap and then I will only crawl.

I wish I could sit down, but there are no free seats. The place is warm enough, at least. I'd much rather watch the skillet and stand closer to the fire. I'm not going to offer, just because I don't think I could.

More and more often, I lose bits and pieces of myself. From my spot, I watch as my mother and her sisters set the table. They barely notice me. I am so quiet, these days, you can hardly hear my steps and so silent chances are they have forgotten my voice.

It doesn't sadden me. I lose and let go.

So long as I'm safe, I don't really care. When I'm outside, though, I can tell I'm being watched, that danger

finds me more easily. I hardly ever leave my enclosure: I you ask me, I bet they can feel it, that I've got something edible hiding under my skin.

There was that one time, not long ago. I had wandered out of town to be on my own. Not a soul stayed at the villas in the winter, but there he was all the same, the stranger. Maybe he had come to air out the holiday house of some doctor wintering in the hinterland. When I realized the stranger was following me, I froze. It could be that he had seen himself in my eyes and I had mirrored his hunger back at him. He started to chase me like a barnyard cat.

I ended up leaving him my leg. It hurt, but not terribly. I determined to lose the one that had fallen off the year before, the time I was run over by a car. Given that the leg had grown back nicely I went with that one, confident that, sooner rather than later, it would pop out again.

Simply wanting it was enough: it came off without a drop of blood spilled. Detached from me, the severed leg didn't stop wriggling. It just wouldn't stay still, might be it was scared, too.

On one foot, I grabbed it with both hands and stretched it out on the ground, somewhere I knew the hunter would happen by. My twitchy leg was left naked once it had slipped out of my skirt. Sock and trainer shoe still on.

It looked like the outstretched leg of a girl sitting in patch of shade – and how was he to know that it wasn't attached to the rest.

Scurrying, I took cover.

The screams came soon and went even sooner.

I hopped all the way through to the still warm leg to retrieve my sock and shoe, relieved just to be alive. I threw the leg in a dumpster close by. It was going to grow back, guaranteed; but still, I had lost something.

My mother and her younger sisters buzz past me. I can hear them mentioning Ture.

My mother says she ran into him on her way to food shopping, that he has found himself a zita, at long last. At that name, nothing stirs inside of me. By now, something only ever happens when I'm scared, hungry, or in my fertile window.

Ture used to liked my round, black eyes, my large pupils. That's what he told me during mating season.

«I love you. You're beautiful, your eyes are beautiful».

But it was too late. A few seasons earlier, his words might have touched me. Instead, I crawled away from him and from his feelings.

We weren't really friends, Ture and I, but almost. He had been an ornament in Mrs. Linuzza's garden every summer of my life. But then, he grew taller and taller, a giant compared to me, and once the hunts of small animals had started in the grass, I dropped from sight. I'd just feel this urge to run.

I stayed short, small, psoriatic. And dark eyed, my pupils large and black.

I might have accepted him, Ture, had it not been for that incident with the

stranger at the villas. At this point, I'm not really interested in words: I need other things, the kind straight out of a channel one documentary: some male to grab by the hips, to bite me on the back of my neck to keep me still and enter me, mounting me as it should be.

Ture is moving up North with his partner. I'm not sad I won't be seeing him again.

Some of my family group also lives up North. They come down sometimes. Today is a holiday so we are having a get together. It's less sunny over there, but still they manage to breed fast: almost always, when they visit, there is a new hatchling. They tell us that they copulate with multiple mates, which to me sounds like a good strategy to continue species, what with hatchlings coming one at a time. Then there is Giorgio, who has no hatchlings and will also choose males as partners. If it were somebody else, they'd make a huge deal out of it, but he is San-Giorgio the miracle-worker.

He never fails to remind me that, if it hadn't been for him... and I nod because I can see that it pleases him. He has brought it up again tonight, while munching on an arancino. The others heard him, they called him San-Giorgio, they laugh.

My mother and I haven't sat down once yet. We slip in between plastic patio chairs and peeled walls, carrying plates, replacing silverware, pouring drinks. If you ask her, I move too slowly. But if I were on all fours, I'd slide under table legs and chairs legs so

fast they wouldn't even see me.

Whenever I walk past him, Giorgio puts on a secret grin which I fail to return. I've been thinking, for a long time actually, that he wouldn't mind copulating with me, despite us being part of the same family group. It used to make me sick, now I don't mind. I almost feel like it, when I'm in heat.

Grandmother can only see through one eye, but now that I'm standing next to Giorgio she stares at us, breathes in once, then shakily lays her bony fingers on his shoulder. «San-Giorgio, my handsome boy, 'annonna». My mother always dries her eyes when she thinks back on it, that I was this close to becoming extinct before my time; my father waves the thought away, as if swatting a fly. One among the many traditions of our family group. I stay silent. Even though it's a lie, San-Giorgio slaying the dragon.

They have all gone to the beach.

By now they'll be soaking in the sun. I am, too, only on my terrace. And I'm thinking about San-Giorgio again. The thing is, I am fertile. When it hits, I am eager for a mount. But I'm here alone, and struggling, because I lack a male. I can't just offer myself, he must do it. And there's also the matter of us sharing the same blood: I need my hatchlings to be healthy.

Unlike me, who was constantly ill. Even that time, when San-Giorgio slayed the dragon. I've been thinking back on it lately, seeing it in my head and always from the outside.

I see myself in bed, hair on my face

and mouth open, dried drool from the corner of my lips down to my chin. I see some movement in the semi-darkness, quick, up on the ceiling. I see that I feel it when the lizard comes crashing down on my cheek. I see the stunned, sleepy look on my face. I see my eyes grow wide, I hear the scream filling up my mouth. I see that San-Giorgio comes along, hair wet and red striped trunks, that he stops at the door. I see and I hear him laugh. I see that a lizard has dropped its tail, which writhes a breath away from my nose, tickling a nostril swollen with snot. I see and I hear myself cry fat tears, coughing as the lizard slips between my lips. I no longer see it, but I remember it darting on my tongue. I see that it hits San-Giorgio: I'm choking. I see and I hear him stop laughing. I see that he is by my side in a flash, shoving two fingers inside my mouth and wriggling blindly. I see that he grabs my tongue. I see that my eyes are leaking and my nose is running. I see that he can't see anything. I see that I push him off, which has him falling on his butt. I see myself cough, spit only saliva, clear my throat, swallow.

Afterward, San-Giorgio made sure I was all right, as white and as red in the face as his trunks. Then, he smelled the air: I had peed myself. He picked up the tail on the pillow between thumb and forefinger, dispassionately. He shot me a warning look then was off downstairs to call his mother, trophy in hand. San-Giorgio the dragon slayer. Me still on the bed in a warm puddle, mouth closed shut; the lizard crawling down

my throat into my stomach.

Since then, I haven't caught the mumps, or the chicken pox. Never a fever, or a cold. I've never caught anything from the others, the people around me outside of my terrarium. At school. At church. At parks.

My mother, the ruler of this territory, was concerned. I came from one of her eggs, but we are no longer part of the same species. She bleeds, sheds her hair and nothing inside of her urges her to fall into a deep sleep at the first signs of cold weather. The others are much the same.

Soon enough, I'll have to give up on something, I can feel it.

Someday, the others will find my skin limp, empty as a cracked shell. It won't be moving, there will be no breathing or pulse, and they'll think I'm dead.

Only, I won't be.

Am I...?

Night. Cold. Bed. Dead. Skin. Down. Floor. Air. Vibrates. Wings. Open. Mouth. Air. Vibrates. Zzz. Hunger. Snap. Drool. Wings. Legs. Blood. Mouth. Mmh. Close. Tear. Swallow. Climb. Wall. Black. Asleep... Awake. Light. Warmth.

Window. Shutter. Crack. Slip out.

Wall. Rooftop. Tile.

Sun.

Vibration. Steps.

Vibration. Buzz.

Vibration. Screaming.

A Dog's Christmas

It was late on Christmas Eve, when Dogeron went outside to take a leak

> After drinking all night long, he was kind of ready to go home.

> > But what's that? What's that sound?

"Someone's getting mugged, behind Mei's Saloon!"





His mind was fuzzy, his eyes were blurry, But clear as day, Dog saw Santa in a hurry!



"What a nerve!" He said.
"What a shock!"
"Can't let this happen,
not on my watch!"

"And a Happy New Year, sucker!"





Adam Ells is a writer from Vancouver, BC and he sent us this original story for publication.

"My Prince, it's here." Sir Owen, from outside. I heard it too. great booming wind-noises like the sudden filling of a sail. Sunlight filtered through the canvas of the tent. The smells of musk and sex filled my nose. I wanted to wallow for a while. I wanted him to come back to bed. I crawled out, pulling on my tunic. Outside, the grass around was trampled down. Our weapons leaned against a rock. He was standing at the edge of the ridge, in only pants. I stared at him like that, his thin, brown back, those little dimples at the hips.

"Look," he said, pointing up.

I stepped up beside him, shielding my eyes. "Where?"

He took my hand, directing it, tracing a line across the sky. I saw it, and I heard the wings. That great, impossible Whoosh. My skin prickled. It was so high up, and the wings glowed with filtered sunlight.

"It'll work," I said.

"Of course it will," Owen said. "We'll hear when it lands." He took my hand again, pulling me towards the tent. I felt the iron ring on his finger, the one my father had given him. He'd been my companion since we were kids. My father had brought him up from the slums of Ferrier. We'd fought in wars together, killed together, knelt in the mud and accepted our knighthoods together. It had been a long time since we'd had time alone like this. I went with him.

Mother always said, "you can solve any problem if you read enough." So, when Father set me the task of rescuing my maiden sister from the terrible beast, and return her to her love, I did what I do best. I read. With Father's gaze over my shoulder, I found things scholars had forgotten, in tomes that were thought to be lost. Dragons hoard gold, yes. They covet gold, everybody knows that. There are so few of them left now, and the few who survive hide deep within the mountains. But there are some who still know. The dragons hoard gold, because the dragons eat gold.

I came to my father with my findings, kneeling before the throne. He was so high up, so far away. He had his court face on. That face that could have been a statue carved in his likeness, rather than the actual man. I told him my plan, masking my pride at its cleverness. He stood up, striding down each stair to stand in front of me. I was careful to stay kneeling, to not look at him.

The dragon came low. I thought of the books I had read. Four legs. Many scholars said that would be impossible, but there it was: thin, snakelike, but with four legs, and a great, disproportionate head that swung about like a bell. It had vast, papery wings, spiderwebbed with veins. I'd heard that they were red, but this one was more reddish brown, like clay. It swooped around, circling the pile of gold coins and plates and cups and cutlery, like a falcon over a lake stalking for prey. We had gathered the gold from the cities of my kingdom. They were only too happy to oblige, with the King's army at their gates.

Owen came out and stood beside me. The dragon landed, and its impact shook the ground. It slithered around, four legs working quickly. Its long, thin tail trailing behind, snaking through the grass around the pile of gold. It opened its mouth, and the air around it shimmered with heat.

"Fire made flesh," I said, and rushed for my notebook.

I could see that it longed for the gold. Its eyes shone as it paced around and sniffed the air. Finally, as if it had no other option, it burrowed through the pile. When it emerged from the other side, gold falling from the sides of its

mouth, belching oily smoke, it slithered around and dove into the pile again. Despite this being one of the great wonders of the world, Owen quickly grew bored. He went off to hunt and came back a few hours later, disappointed. All the animals had fled in terror.

As it ate, its belly distended and stretched. When it was done, it wallowed for a while. Its skin smouldered against the grass. I could see its eyes, burning orange coals in its head. I wanted to look into them up close. The whole valley reeked of burning grass and melted metal. The ground around the dragon was burned and furrowed, the grass scorched away. It spread its wings, and began to beat. It looked like a snake after it has eaten a rabbit, the lump of gold clearly visible in the middle of its body, stretching the scales there so that I could see the glow of the fire underneath. It seemed impossible, but the dragon flew.

We watched it, Flying east, into the foothills. Owen packed up camp while I traced its path. It wasn't hard; it went in a straight line. If we kept our course, we'd find it. We rode our horses at a canter. I was glad to get off that ridge and ride again. My horse was as well. She'd never liked being stabled for very long. She grew restive and irritable. I reached my hand down and patted her neck, felt the short hairs, smelled the sweetness of horse sweat. I felt oddly sentimental. I had the feeling of wanting to savour every moment. The feeling that I was riding closer to my destiny. Late in the morning, I saw smoke rising

from the other side of the hill. I stopped as the ground began to get steeper. There was a knot of trees off to our right, and I could hear a stream somewhere close by.

"Wait here," I said.

Owen shifted in his saddle. "Why?" I looked up. How could I tell him that I wanted to shape my own place in history? "My sister," I said. "Who knows what condition she's in. I want to come to her alone. As her brother."

He regarded me for a long moment, his face a mask of stone.

"Father would want..." I said. "He would want me to do it like this. For it to be known that I went alone."

At that, Owen nodded. One sharp nod. He understood Father's will.

"If I don't come down by tomorrow, come find me. But carefully," I said.

I wanted to get close to him, to kiss him goodbye, but my horse was shifting underneath me, raring to go. She'd always been like that, sensing my anticipation. "Goodbye," I said. Owen sat there as I turned towards the mountains.

As we crossed through the foothills, I began to smell sulfur and scorched stone. The grass here was thin and bristly. I rode slow, at a walk. There was no rush. The sun was high in the sky. Fate wasn't going anywhere.

We crested over a hill and I saw a cave, carved from a cliff face. Out in front of the cave's mouth, thirty feet or so away from the cave entrance, lay the dragon. It had crawled out onto a shelf of stone and lay down. It was rolled over on to its side, its great belly stretched and distended by the ball of molten gold lodged in its centre. Its eyes were closed. Stretch marks split through its scales, steaming with heat. All around, the stone was black and cracked and smoking. Even from up high, hundreds of feet away, I thought the air was a little warmer. I hobbled my horse there, and patted her nose. There would be enough grass for her if I didn't return. I secured the sword at my side, and made my way down on foot.

As I got closer, the heat became almost unbearable. I knew my skin would burn and my clothes would catch fire if I got too close. I turned right, skirting the aura of heat. I tried to imagine what it would be like to touch the dragon's scales. I'd be dead long before I got to it. But still, I wondered how they felt.

She was waiting for me at the mouth of the cave. "You," she said. "I should have known."

She looked at me with a baleful, almost bored expression. It reminded me of when we were children, and I'd tell her tall tales over dinner, at our father's giant dinner table. She'd look at me just like that. That piercing, fiery stare, brow furrowed. In fact, she looked thin as a blade, and malnourished. Flat. Her skin was slick and shiny with sweat, her dark hair drawn back in greasy mats.

"Annika," I said. "You look well."

She crossed her arms, staring at me in cold silence.

I continued. "I don't know why the dragon took you."

She didn't move, just stared at me. I could feel myself fidgeting.

"And I don't know how you're still alive. But," I said, "it's time to come home."

She gave a deep snort. "What did you do to her?" she said.

"Who?"

"Her." She pointed to the dragon, curled up behind us.

"Oh," I said. "I... I fed it—her, gold." I couldn't help the grin creeping up my face, the triumph was still too close.

She was on me in a flash, grabbing the front of my shirt. "You stupid fool." She brought her face close to mine. Her breath smelled like ash. "Did it ever occur to you that I don't want to be saved?" She let go and stepped back, visibly quelling her anger.

"I don't understand," I said. "You were taken. Father has made a good match for you at home. He's handsome and kind. He's from Ringwood, in the west. On the coast. It's beautiful there. You'll be able—"

"So that's why you came."

"What?" I said.

"Father needs me for a match. Is that right? Only willing to spend the gold when I'm needed. What, is it to form some alliance?"

"I'm rescuing you," I said.

She crossed her arms, staring at me. Her clothes were no better than rags, her boots clearly worn right down. I stood quiet, not moving. She stared at me, the anger on her face fading a little.

"How is our lord Father?" she asked.

"He's..." I hesitated. "The same. Mother died."

She softened at that, but only a little.

I'd grown up with Mother. Annika had stayed at the capital with Father.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"We need you to come home," I said.
"I don't know what you're doing here—"
"I'm living here," she said. "I'm never

"I'm living here," she said. "I'm never going back."

"I don't understand."

"Of course you don't," she said. "You went off with Mother, to the beautiful south. And then you went off to war. I got to stay home. To serve Father. To be paraded out in front of his allies. To dance with every man who might entertain the idea of marrying me. To endure his endless abuses."

"His abuses?" I asked.

"Of course," she said. "Were you blind? Everyone at court knew. He demanded perfection, and I was never perfect, so corrections were in order. That's how I grew up."

I remembered it, if I was being honest. Some of it. But I also remembered learning the sword, and playing in the yard with my friends. Annika always seemed so dour, even back then. It was easy, as a child, to turn your back, to tell yourself a story that wasn't true. What was I to do?

"But that'll be over if you come back," I said. "You'll marry this man, and you'll never have to see him—"

"I'm not doing it. It's his plan. His need. His order. I'm never doing anything he tells me to again."

"This is no place for a princess," I said.
"I'm safe here," Annika said.

"With... with that thing?" I said.

As if it- she heard me, the dragon

shifted. A rock split open, releasing a burst of steam. Annika stood up, staring me down. "I wasn't kidnapped. I wasn't taken. I don't need an idiot prince who thinks he's a hero to come rescue me. I've already been rescued! I called for escape. I whispered in the dead of night to be freed from my prison. I dreamed of a dragon, and a dragon came." She turned away from me, walking towards the cave. "Begone," she said. "I don't wish to see you anymore." She disappeared into the blackness.

I stood there, stunned. I turned, looking at the dragon. She was on her stomach, eyes closed. Her belly glowed with molten heat. One eye opened. She looked right at me. I felt her light on me, and the barest brush of some strange mind on mine. And then the eye closed. "Wait," I said, turning and following her into the darkness.

The cave smelled like burnt stone. I sat across from her. She was in a wicker chair, nursing a pot hanging over a low The smoke trailed upwards, through a chimney that the dragon must have carved or melted out of the stone. In the corner there was a pallet, on which sat a straw mattress. The walls had been gouged so that there were shelves, on which plants and books and candles sat. It was more comfortable than I expected. She was ignoring me. I chose to exercise patience, letting my gaze wander over the cave, marvelling over the workmanship. The walls were so smooth, the shelves so carefully placed. Perhaps these creatures are more

intelligent than history books suggest. She handed me a wooden bowl, filled with a spicy-smelling vegetable broth. I smiled. "You have two bowls," I said.

She sat down across from me, in the wicker chair. "You never know."

We ate. The broth burned, that surface-level burn, the one that makes you feel like your tongue's on fire rather than the back of your throat. It was good, though. When we were done, I sat back and watched her. She stared just past my head.

"Does she speak?" I asked.

"She has a name," Annika said. "Mathera."

"Mathera," I said, trying the sounds out. "She speaks then."

"Of course," Annika said

"What does she say?" I asked.

She shrugged. "The things anyone says, I suppose. She likes for me to read to her."

The world morphed in my mind. There was something fundamental to the idea that humans were the only ones who'd be able to take in the information in a book.

"What... What do her scales feel like?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Smooth. Like river stones."

The silence grew and grew between us as we sat, limply holding our bowls.

"What he did," I said. "I didn't know."

She looked at me, and for a moment I saw a great well of hurt on her face. Then she pushed it down, like she always did. Whenever she fell, as a child, she'd never cry. The fire was low, and the

light from outside the cave was fading. "You knew," she said. "But you didn't want to."

I wanted the silence between us to last longer now. I felt like whatever I said next would be the wrong thing. I didn't have the words to make things right. I felt like I was in the middle of a battle without a sword or armour. "I should have stopped him."

"You couldn't have," she said. "You're just as much under his thumb as I was. He might not have hit you, but—"

"No. I could have."

She looked at me calmly, all that fire drained out of her. She was saying these things like they were the most boring, obvious facts. "Who sent you here?" she said. "Did you come because you wanted to save me, or because you were told?"

I didn't know what to say. The embers popped, the fire leaping and shifting, changing.

"That's what I thought," she said.

I looked down. I could feel her watching me.

"How many people have you killed for him?" she asked. "How much of your life has been spent working to please him?"

I focussed on my hands, clenched together between my knees. I felt the weight of the sword at my side.

"You couldn't have stopped him," she said. "No one in the world could have stopped him."

Something caught in my throat. I was shaking. My vision blurred. Ghosts crowded the edge of my mind, visions

of blood on stone, and fire through glass. Tears escaped from my eyes, slithering down and dripping on to my shirt.

Her hand, on my fists. Her palm so smooth. "Brother," she said. "Brother." And she hugged me. I stayed there, rigid, for a long time. Then, finally, I let my hands unclasp, and wrapped my arms around her.

"You don't have to come back," I said.
"I'll tell him something."

We were outside again, looking at the dragon. The sun was setting, orange glow seeped through the clouds like an infection. She glowed softly, the dragon. A red heart in the orange.

"Tell him what?" she asked.

"That you're dead," I said.

I saw someone scrabbling along the hillside. Owen.

"You're still with him, then," she said. I looked over. She had a grim little

smile on her face.

"I'll deal with him," I said.

I went to meet him, at the edge of the glow cast by the sleeping dragon. He was using his spear as a walking stick. He stopped, looking at me with those cold, ice-blue eyes that so attracted me. Now, I felt fear of them, a fear I didn't fully understand.

"You're still alive," he said.

"Yes," I said.

"She's alive," he said.

"Yes," I said. And after a pause, "she's not coming back."

He stood there, studying me. He had this way of standing so casually, even in tense situations, even in the worst battles. "I don't think that's your decision to make," he said. "The King has given orders. Orders we need to follow."

I knew that would be what he said. I'd always known it. I stepped up to him, grasping his shoulders, trying to transfer all the tenderness in my heart at that moment. "It's not about that," I said. "She's my sister. If I say—"

"I am loyal to the King."

I saw violence in his eyes. I half-heartedly reached for my sword, but I knew I could never fight him. He jabbed my stomach with the butt-end of his spear. I doubled over. I felt the snapping sting of the shaft against my cheek. There was a gap and I was on the ground, blinking, trying to clear my vision.

I heard Owen's voice. "You can either come willingly, or I can drag you."

My sister: "I'm not going back."

Owen: "The King requires your--"

"I'm not going back."

"So be it."

### "I'M NOT GOING BACK!"

I dragged my head up. He had her lifted up by the neck. She was kicking. No. No. She was lifting him up. Rage contorted her face. He tried to jab at her with his spear but she grabbed it and broke off the tip. She forced him backwards. He kicked his feet at the ground, trying to gain some purchase. Dust and dirt flew up where his boots caught. He clawed at her arms, trying to break her grip, gasping for breath. Still, she forced him back, towards the centre of the clearing. Towards the dragon.

Owen screamed. His skin reddened, blisters popped out on his face and neck. His hair smoked and blackened. His tunic caught fire. The skin on his cheeks was melting. His belly burst from the heat, steaming blood spurting through the gaps in his chain mail, burning in mid-air, disappearing. His scream turned to a low, steady moan, an animal sound. Finally, I heard his lungs pop, the breath forced like a bellows through his ribcage. His body dropped at the dragon's feet. Owen smouldered and melted in his armour.

Annika stood over him, her clothes burning away. She turned to me, orange sunset-light glinting against her skin. Shining. The light refracted and danced, beads of reflected light like a cracked mirror. Smooth. Not skin. Scales. They glittered individually, all over her body. Her shape, too, was different. The curves and dips one would expect were imperfections Bumps gone. and scrubbed off, like a painters version of a person. Her belly button was gone, and her nipples. She walked towards me, towering above me as I lay on the ground.

"No," I said. It wasn't logical, just the only word that swam into my addled mind.

She smiled a magnanimous smile. It reminded me of Father's smile when he was at court. "Brother," she said. "I'm going to be a dragon."

I got to my feet, swaying. My dinner churned in my stomach. I drew my sword. "You killed him," I said.

She held her hands up, placating, calming. That's why her palms were so smooth. No lines. Scrubbed away by the

dragon magic. "Henry. I told you. I'm not going back." She took a step towards me, still too close to the aura of heat for me to get close. Behind her, Owen burned. All of his flesh seemed to catch at once, like straw when you touch it with a torch. I gripped the sword harder. My whole body shook with rage and disgust and sickness.

"Don't you see?" she said. "He was Father." She gestured to the remains of Owen. "Just another way to control you."

"No," I said. I could hear the crack in my voice. Like a child's whine.

"Stay here, with me. When I'm... when my transformation is done, I can help you. We can go back, and together, we can burn the palace to the ground. We can kill him together."

I looked at her in horror. "No," I said. "We-you can't."

Her face hardened. The pleading sadness was gone in an instant. She stared back at me, and I thought I could see an orange glow in her eyes.

"I will," she said. "That place is rotted. Rotted all the way through. And I'm going to burn it hollow."

She walked towards me, eyes locked with mine. She sparkled in the dusk-light. It reminded me of when we were children, and we'd play in the pools on the grounds, and our skin would sparkle like that, dappled with sunlight-filled droplets. She came closer. Close enough. I adjusted the grip on my sword, and took a step forward.

Last night, I was up late reading. I saw Father shuffle past my door, trying to

find the privy. He was going the wrong way. I took his arm and led him. As I walked him down the hall, I realized how thin he'd become, how small. I was so frightened of him. Now I just pity him.

I think it ended when I came back. I laid Annika's burned, torn dress at his feet, and something went out of him. He stood up, walking down the stairs to his throne, and stood, nudging the dress a little with his boot. I turned my face up to look at him. He stared back at me, his eyes two chips of flint. "So," he said. "She's dead then."

I handle most of the Palace business now. I feel the coils of royal life snaking around me, never to let go. I am to be married soon, before father dies. There is so much I must do. So much I want to do. My days are filled with my ambitions, filtered through my obligations. It is foolish, I realize now, to expect anything of this life. We are only the obligations we fulfil, the promises we keep.

The nights, though, are still my own. I stay up late, reading and writing. I wish to tell my own story. Perhaps, one day, when I am old, children will read of my deeds. Or perhaps not. My favourite place to read is at my balcony, with candles behind me and the windows flung open wide, the ocean breeze wafting in. Sometimes the candles are blown out, but I don't mind getting up to relight them. It's important to me to be by the window at night. Although I'm reading, a part of my mind is still in the present, still by the window. I'm always listening. I hear the sounds of the city,

the patter of late night walkers, and the guards in their armour moving around below. My people. Every night, I pause in my reading and look up at the stars. I wait, trying to catch movement, trying to see a shape black out the twinkling white lights. Listening for the sound of wings.

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